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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: FOREIGN ADVISER OUTLINES CARETAKER GOVERNMENT'S
ENDGAME

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY:
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11. (C) As it approaches the end of its tenure, Bangladesh's Caretaker Government is focused on holding free, fair and credible elections and a smooth transfer of power to an elected successor, according to Foreign Adviser Iftekhar Chowdhury. The CTG would like to ensure continuity of the reform process by reaching agreement with the political parties on ratification of the 110 ordinances passed since January 2007. The CTG fears that a Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government would be less inclined to ratify its actions, and more likely to take revenge against members of the incumbent government. The CTG is pleased with the status of the bilateral U.S.-Bangladesh relationship, as demonstrated during CODEL McCain's recent visit.

Foreign Adviser Review Bilateral Relationship
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12. (U) The Ambassador met with Foreign Adviser Dr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury December 17. MFA Acting Director General Americas and Pacific Wing AFM Gousal Azam Sarker and Pol/Econ Counselor (notetaker) also participated in the meeting. The Ambassador provided a readout of his recent visit to Washington, including meetings with representatives of the Obama Transition Team. During the visit, the Ambassador noted, he had stressed the importance of the upcoming transition in Bangladesh and the importance of U.S. engagement over the next 8 - 10 months. The Foreign Adviser praised the strength of the bilateral relationship and cited the success of CODEL McCain as an example of the strong U.S.-Bangladesh partnership. Both agreed that Senator McCain's comments about the importance of winners and losers working together after elections had resonated in Bangladesh. (Note: Discussion of Burma, LeT Designation, and Kosovo Recognition will be reported septel. End Note)

Caretaker Government's Endgame
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13. (C) The Ambassador congratulated the Foreign Adviser on Bangladesh's lifting of the State of Emergency earlier that day. Iftekhar said that this had always been the Caretaker Government's (CTG) intention, and he was pleased that the parties had welcomed the move. At the same time, the CTG had noted with concern that Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Khaleda Zia had been making statements critical of the government while on the campaign trail. Iftekhar lamented that the CTG was not in a position to respond to these accusations. He acknowledged the BNP's desire to tap

into the anti-incumbency sentiments of the electorate but worried about what Zia's criticism might portend. The Ambassador highlighted the USG commitment to mounting a robust election observation effort, which would include exit polling. This was intended to enhance confidence in the election results.

¶4. (C) Iftekhar noted the CTG's efforts to ensure free, fair and credible polls and emphasized the bureaucracy's commitment to neutrality. Iftekhar said the CTG was also interested in a brief transition effort to ensure a smooth handover of power to the next government. Iftekhar said that this could be complicated if the elections resulted in a hung parliament without a clear winner. It would then be up to the President to invite one side to form a government, and former President Ershad's Jatiya Party could play the role of kingmaker. While the CTG would remain in office after elections and the army would still be deployed to provide security, Iftekhar worried that the power of the government would erode once the election was held. He also expressed concern that the next government might not share the incumbent's commitment to secular, progressive values.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked whether the Foreign Adviser was expressing fears of the consequences of a BNP-led Four Party Alliance victory. The Adviser acknowledged this and said he hoped that the permanent civil service which shared the secular values he admired would act as a moderating force. The Ambassador also noted the importance of a commitment by the parties to ratify the ordinances passed by the CTG. Collectively, the ordinances were good and helped establish a better framework for democracy.

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Future of the CTG Ordinances

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¶6. (C) Iftekhar agreed with the Ambassador's sentiment but noted that there was not yet an agreement with the parties on how to proceed with ratification of the ordinances. There had been discussion of a constitutional amendment, but this would require a 2/3 majority. There were now 110 ordinances that would have to pass within 30 days, and this represented a tall order. At present, the CTG was considering a proposition to allow the next Parliament to consider the ordinances in two omnibus resolutions (Note: the requirement for two resolutions was the result of a difference in how "money bills" needed to be treated). There had been talk of convening the previous parliament to complete this task, but that had not proved possible.

¶7. (C) The CTG sensed that the Awami League was more approachable and amenable to a compromise on the ordinances, Iftekhar continued. The problem with the BNP was that only Khaleda Zia could make decisions. On balance, Iftekhar assessed it would be self defeating for the parties not to pass the ordinances. Iftekhar noted that Zia was on record promising to ratify all ordinances that were constitutional. Ultimately, the CTG and the two major parties had to come to some agreement. Commerce Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman had been charged with finding a solution. In order to avoid a return to the status quo ante, the CTG wanted the two parties to work together. There was hope at the local level, Iftekhar said, citing the agreement of party leaders in Sylhet Division to continue with development projects begun by the CTG. The Ambassador noted that this was not the case everywhere in the country, citing his visit to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where the parties had radically different views of the future of the area.

Comment

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¶8. (C) Despite protestations of neutrality, Iftekhar clearly signaled his desire to see the Awami League form the next

government. We have heard from others that he has indicated a desire to stay on as Foreign Minister should the AL win (although we doubt this would come to pass). Beyond this personal preference, however, Iftekhar's comments do illustrate a gnawing fear in elite circles about the consequences of another BNP-Jamaat Islami government. If the BNP's electoral prospects improve and the anti-incumbent rhetoric from Zia and other leaders continues, Iftekhar and others may become increasingly worried about their futures and that of the country.

MORIARTY